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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in fall 1980 at Los Angeles Valley College (LAVC) to develop a greater understanding of the mental health/counseling needs of students. Specifically, the study sought to determine which stress-inducing conditions (stressors) had the greatest effect on students and the kinds of interventions and strategies that might be appropriate and effective in meeting student needs. An objective test based on the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale and an open-ended survey of students' perceptions of stressful situations in their own and friends' lives were administered to 124 students enrolled in five health classes at LAVC. Findings from the objective survey indicated that: (1) the most frequently cited stressors were financial worries, general worry, increased workload at school, chronic car trouble, and a change in living conditions; and (2) ranked in terms of degree of stress caused, the main stressors were serious argument with instructor, death of a close friend, failure in an important course, and pregnancy. Results from the open-ended survey indicated that of eight major categories, personal/social and academic factors were the main stress inducers. The study conclusions emphasize the need for timely counseling intervention to aid students in times of stress. The study report includes a discussion of stress and the survey instruments. (HB)

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Mental Health/Counseling Needs Assessment

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INTRODUCTION

Counseling programs are organized around perceived student needs, often without data to back up assumptions. Recently, considerable data has been collected relative to the evaluation of existing programs, which is congruent with developing concerns over accountability issues. There is a dearth of research, however, directed towards understanding the mental health/counseling needs of students, with particularly little attention being paid to community college students. In an effort to develop a greater understanding of the mental health/counseling needs of students at Los Angeles Valley College, a study was undertaken in the Fall of 1980. MacDougall (1981) provides the following perspective:

In some respects, though the future of higher education is considered bleak by many--it could well represent a most opportune time for us to provide important and needed answers. . . . if we are prepared to do so. (p. 1)

Perhaps this investigation will provide some of those needed answers regarding student needs, which could be translated ultimately into greater student development and reduced attrition at Los Angeles Valley College. Ultimately, our commitment to the Student Personnel Point of View is at stake here, which is based upon a statement issued by the American Council on Education:

The concept of education is broadened to include attention to the student's well-rounded development--physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually, as well as intellectually. (American Council on Education, 1949, p. 1)

Selye (1974) has described stress as a "nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it" (p. 14). There seem to be certain physiological and psychological reactions to stress that occur routinely in reaction to chronic stress, regardless of the source. For example, physiological reactions to stress may include heightened blood pressure, increased heart rate, as well as increased serum cholesterol; and psychological reactions may include depression or increased anxiety.

Stress, however, is not all bad. In fact, an optimal level of stress must be reached in order for human beings to be alert and function at their best. We are most concerned here with chronic stress, life change, and its relationship to students' mental and physical illnesses. Naturally, when students are functioning at their best physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and socially, there is the best chance for increased academic performance, happiness, and the least chance for dropping out of college.

Stress theory, which is based upon the work of Selye (1956), concluded that physiological responses to stress, if chronic or frequently occurring, can result in illness and/or disease states. The General Adaptation Syndrome described by Selye in 1956 theorizes three distinct stages of stress: alarm reaction, resistance, and exhaustion. Through these stages the body adapts to the stressor so as to restore equilibrium.

Chronic stress may exhaust the body's resources, thereby producing illness and disease. In the case of students there may be allied problems such as the inability to concentrate, study, and participate actively in the academic community.

Stress may arise from biological stressors (heat, cold, etc.), psychological stressors (threat to self-esteem), sociological stressors (death of a loved one, divorce, unemployment), or philosophical stressors (purpose in life).

To prevent the deleterious effects of stress, intervention can occur at several points in the model. For example, the student's life situation can be changed to avoid stressors, or minimize the effects of stressors. A student, in many cases, can choose the amount of life change at a particular point in time to lessen stress; emotions can be dealt with through counseling; perceptions of stressors can be altered through systematic desensitization; and, further, stress resistant conditioning can be utilized such as strenuous exercise, meditation, and progressive relaxation.

Students make many important decisions about their lives and their behavior, including but not limited to the following: drug and alcohol related behavior, sexual behavior, developing occupational choices, and providing for a suitable living environment. In order to develop a greater understanding for student needs, this study was undertaken to find out which stressors were most distressing, and what kinds of counseling interventions and strategies might be most appropriate and effective in meeting these student needs.

METHODOLOGY AND INSTRUMENTATION

The sample population utilized in this investigation consisted of students enrolled in five health classes at Los Angeles Valley College (N = 124). Since Health is a general education requirement at the college, and since day and evening classes were utilized, it was felt that these students would be representative of the population of students at large with respect to demographic variables such as age, sex, and socioeconomic status (Appendix C).

A two-pronged approach was utilized in the investigation: (1) administration of an objective stress survey based upon a modified version of Holmes and Rahe (1967) Stress Scale, and (2) administration of a subjective survey developed specifically for the population of students at Los Angeles Valley College, where students could respond to open-ended questions centering around stressful situations in their own or their friends' lives during the past year. Administration, data collection, scoring, and interpretative procedures were standardized and coordinated by one Health Department faculty member.

The Holmes and Rahe (1967) Stress Scale was objectively scored such that items were simply tabulated by level of stress checked. Based upon these findings, objective rankings were then accomplished relative to total weighted stressor index and secondly, relative to average stress for each item.

In order to score the subjective stress survey, a categorization system needed to be developed to bring order to the free-flowing subjective responses. This system was developed by the Director of Research at Los Angeles Valley College and resulted in the following categories of concerns:

1. Personal/Social
2. Academic
3. Multiple Stress Situations
4. Health
5. Family
6. Vocational
7. Money Related
8. Miscellaneous

Subjective responses were then categorized accordingly. These categories were then placed in rank order based upon the number of responses placed in each category.

FINDINGS

We will consider the objective findings first, and then the subjective findings. Following this, there will be a discussion of the results, comparing and contrasting objective with subjective findings, and considering implications for student personnel generally and counseling services more specifically.

Tables 1 and 2 present stressors in a variety of fashions designed to clearly represent the objective stress survey data. Interestingly, the stressors experienced by students do not seem to be greatly different from what one might imagine to be the stressors experienced by the community at large, or even what

Table 1
Ranking of Weighted Stressors
Objective Stress Survey

-
1. Financial Worries
 2. General Worry
 3. Other Stress Situation
 4. Increased Workload at School
 5. Chronic Car Trouble
 6. Change in Living Conditions
 7. Change in Health of Family Member
 8. Serious Argument with Close Friend
 9. Breakup of Boyfriend/Girlfriend
 10. Change in Sleeping Habits
 11. Change in Job
 12. Change in Social Activities
 13. Trouble with Parents
 14. Sex Problems
 15. Change in Eating Habits
 16. Lower Grades Than Expected
 17. Death of Close Friend
 18. Return to School After Absence
 19. Child Care Concerns
 20. Death of Close Family Member
 21. Change in Number of Family Get Togethers
 22. Single Parent Responsibilities
 23. Minor Traffic Violation
 24. Trouble with Children
 25. Other Stress Situations
 26. Dropped More Than One Class
 27. Divorce
 28. Outstanding Personal Achievement
 29. New Girl or Boy Friend
 30. Marriage

Table 1 (cont.)

31. First Semester in College
 32. Serious Argument with Instructor
 33. Failed Important Course
 34. Pregnancy
 35. Change of Major
 36. Too Many Missed Classes
 37. Change of College
 38. Fired From Job
 39. Divorce of Parents
 40. Jail Term
 41. Retirement
 42. Other Stress Situations
-

might be experienced by the citizens in the United States. The concerns ranking very high such as financial worries, general worry, relationship problems, car trouble, and health related, appear to be fairly significant problems in everyday living.

Table 2 presents data by a ranking of average stress per stressor. It is important to note that there are a few stressors which do not occur with as high a frequency as other stressors, but nevertheless, carry a very high value of stress for those students who experience such a life event. For example, death of a close friend and pregnancy fall in the top five stressors when examining ranking by average stress, whereas in the total ranking of weighted stressors (Table 1), those stressors rank in the lower half.

Table 2
 Ranking of Stressors by Average Stress
 Objective Stress Survey

Stressor	Number Choosing	Average Stress
1. Serious Argument with Instructor	1	5.0
2. Death of a Close Friend	5	4.0
3. Failed Important Course	1	4.0
4. Pregnancy	1	4.0
5. Serious Argument with Close Friend	8	4.0
6. Single Parent Responsibilities	3	4.0
7. Divorce	2	4.0
8. Breakup of Boyfriend/Girlfriend	8	3.9
9. Chronic Car Trouble	10	3.8
10. Lower Grades Than Expected	6	3.7
11. Change of Health of Family Member	9	3.6
12. New Girl or Boyfriend	12	3.5
13. Increased Workload at School	11	3.5
14. Outstanding Personal Achievement	2	3.5
15. Financial Worries	17	3.5
16. Change in Job	8	3.5
17. Child Care Concerns	5	3.4
18. Sex Problems	8	3.3
19. Dropped More Than One Class	3	3.3
20. Death of Close Family Member	5	3.0
21. General Worry	16	3.2
22. Change in Eating Habits	7	3.1
23. Major Personal Injury or Illness	5	3.0
24. Fired From Job	1	3.0
25. First Semester in College	2	3.0
26. Change of College	1	3.0
27. Change in Living Conditions	12	2.9
28. Change in Social Activities	10	2.8

Table 2 (cont.)

Stressor	Number Choosing	Average Stressor
29. Change in Number of Family Get Togethers	6	2.7
30. Change in Sleeping Habits	11	2.6
31. Minor Traffic Violations	5	2.2
32. Return to School After Absence	1	2.2
33. Marriage	3	2.0
34. Change of Major	2	2.0
35. Trouble with Your Children	5	2.0
36. Divorce Between Parents	2	1.5
37. Too Many Missed Classes	2	1.5
38. Jail Term	0	0
39. Retirement	0	0

The subjective findings (Table 3) on the other hand, were obtained from responses to open-ended questions. Interestingly, however, cross validation derives from evidence that the broader subjective stress survey categories would closely approximate objective concerns if these were to be placed in broad categories. Here, the Personal/Social area was the number one category of stressors. Examples include the following: boyfriend problems, breakup with girlfriend, friend killed, and lack of motivation.

Category number two, academic concerns, include comments such as choosing a school, stress before exams, and what to major in. Vocational and money related concerns, number three,

Table 3
 Ranking of Categories of Stressors
 Subjective Stress Survey

Category	Number of Responses
1. Personal/Social	153
2. Academic	71
3. Vocational/Money Related	45
4. Multiple Stress Situations	39
5. Health Related	35
6. Family Related	33
7. Miscellaneous	9

listed such comments as supporting myself, loss of job, financial problems, and job pressures. Multiple stress situations, number four, include a variety of stressors; for example, loved one's death, long-term relationship breakup, parents' approval, low grade point average, finding self-worth, and lacking intimacy with others. Multiple stressors may be linked to one key issue, such as low self-concept.

Health related stressors, number five, include issues such as smoking problems, drugs, and family illness. Family related concerns, number six, involved such comments as don't get along with parents, problems with aging mother, and living at home after having apartment.

In light of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954) it would seem that these significant non-academic student needs must be met prior to the possibility of extensive and vital student energies being directed towards higher level academic/knowledge related needs.

In this connection, 30 percent of the students from the sample indicated that they would like to receive counseling for their concerns. This would be approximately 8,000 at Los Angeles Valley College.

Counseling services are definitely needed in the non-academic areas in order for students to develop fully. This has important implications for reduction of attrition. Whatever the problem may be, for example, financial or boyfriend/girlfriend breakup, it needs to be handled before the student decides to withdraw from college. Often students in need do not seek counseling until they have decided to withdraw. At this point, little can be done to help the student to stay in school. Clearly, early counseling interventions are essential.

Counseling intervention needs to be timed appropriately to meet the needs of the student when that need first arises, or even when the student first applies to the college. Therefore, what is called for is even greater student personnel counseling energies spent in these non-academic areas of conflict. This is not to say, however, that academic counseling is not very important and integral to a successful college counseling program.

In 1930, Jose Ortega y Gasset wrote the following:

To move with assurance in the tangle of life one must be cultivated, one must know the topography--the "ways" and "methods." One must have an idea of the time and place in which he lives; in a word, the culture of the age. (p. 45)

This statement seems relevant to counseling today in the broader sense. Student development theorists argue the importance of assisting students in the process towards growth, such as developing greater independence, making career decisions, and arriving at a secure set of values and moral judgments. It seems clear, however, that development in one area through certain activities or experiences encourages development in another domain. Keeping in mind the breadth and depth of student needs, it is clear that all aspects of our college environment can and must contribute to student development.

More specific strategies aimed at prevention of problems and assistance in decision-making must be developed. For example, the career center can assist students in developing occupational choices; stress management seminars can assist in coping with stress; psychological services can facilitate students' emotional development; Physical Education classes can assist with stress-resistant conditioning; Health classes can teach holistic principles; specific counseling strategies can alter students' perception of stressors, such as use of systematic desensitization and meditation; and specially trained counselors can intervene appropriately in crisis situations.

Perhaps Pullias (1965) best captures the philosophy necessary to the full understanding of a needs assessment as follows:

Man is conceived as a delicate combination of the physical and spiritual, perhaps unique in the universe: as a treasure of almost unlimited potential which proper processes can uncover, a sensitive yet unbelievably durable instrument for discovery, refinement and creative use of truth, beauty, goodness and love. (p. 146)

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT STRESS SCALE SURVEY
LOS ANGELES VALLEY COLLEGE
Objective

APPENDIX A

STUDENT STRESS SCALE SURVEY
LOS ANGELES VALLEY COLLEGE

Objective

The student stress scale was designed to assess the level of stress experienced by college students due to various life situations. If you have experienced any of the following events during the previous twelve months, please refer to the rating scale below. This scale will allow you to rate the level of stress you are currently experiencing due to that event. When you have found the number which best describes your current level of stress caused by that event, place the number which precedes it on the line next to the item.

1. little or no stress
2. mild stress
3. moderate stress
4. high stress
5. very high stress

- ____ 1. Death of a close family member
- ____ 2. Death of a close friend
- ____ 3. Divorce between parents
- ____ 4. Jail term
- ____ 5. Major personal injury or illness
- ____ 6. Marriage
- ____ 7. Fired from job
- ____ 8. Failed important course
- ____ 9. Change in health of a family member
- ____ 10. Pregnancy
- ____ 11. Sex problems
- ____ 12. Serious argument with close friend
- ____ 13. Change of major
- ____ 14. Trouble with parents
- ____ 15. New girl or boy friend
- ____ 16. Increased workload at school
- ____ 17. Outstanding personal achievement
- ____ 18. First semester in college
- ____ 19. Change in living conditions
- ____ 20. Serious argument with instructor
- ____ 21. Lower grades than expected
- ____ 22. Change in sleeping habits
- ____ 23. Change in social activities
- ____ 24. Change in eating habits
- ____ 25. Chronic car trouble

STUDENT STRESS SCALE SURVEY
LOS ANGELES VALLEY COLLEGE (Objective)
Page 2

Sex _____

Marital
Status _____

Birthdate _____

- _____ 26. Change in number of family get togethers
- _____ 27. Too many missed classes
- _____ 28. Change of college
- _____ 29. Dropped more than one class
- _____ 30. Minor traffic violations
- _____ 31. Return to school after absence
- _____ 32. Child care concerns
- _____ 33. Single parent responsibilities
- _____ 34. Financial worries
- _____ 35. General worry
- _____ 36. Breakup of boyfriend/girlfriend
- _____ 37. Divorce
- _____ 38. Retirement
- _____ 39. Change in job
- _____ 40. Trouble with your children
- _____ 41. Other stress situation _____
- _____ 42. Other stress situation _____
- _____ 43. Other stress situation _____

¹Adapted from T.H. Holmes and R.H. Rahe, "The Social Readjustment Rating Scale," Journal of Psychosomatic Research, vol. 11, p. 213, 1967.

APPENDIX B

STUDENT STRESS SURVEY
LOS ANGELES VALLEY COLLEGE
Subjective

Purpose: The psychological Services Center is interested in finding out more about your concerns related to stress in order to provide better counseling services. Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

What are the most difficult problems which you or your friends have had during the past year? Did somebody help you/them?

Would you or your friends like to receive personal counseling help for these problems through the college?

___ Yes ___ No Please explain.

Please list other difficult problems that you or your friends have experienced. Did somebody help you/them?

Would you or your friends like to receive personal counseling help for these problems through the college?

___ Yes ___ No Please explain.

What are some of the changes you or your friends have gone through in the past year?

continued....

STUDENT STRESS SURVEY
LOS ANGELES VALLEY COLLEGE

Would you or your friends like to receive personal counseling help with these changes?

___ Yes ___ No Please explain.

Are there any special areas of concern to you or to your friends?

Would you or your friends like to receive personal counseling help with these areas of concern?

___ Yes ___ No Please explain.

Please use remaining space to discuss other concerns or anything that might be on your mind.

APPENDIX C
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

<u>Sample</u>			<u>Population</u>
<u>SEX</u>			
Male	M	39%	44%
Female	F	61%	56%
<u>MARITAL STATUS</u>			
Single	S	76%	64%
Married	M	20%	27%
Divorced/ Widowed	D/W	4%	9%
<u>AGE</u>			
Under 20		44%	20%
20-24		27%	29%
25-39		22%	33%
40-59		7%	14%
60+		1%	4%

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